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TORONTO'S MOVEABLE SHORELINE

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INTRODUCTION

Almost from its inception the City of Toronto has been expanding out into Lake Ontario, taking advantage of relatively shallow contours to create inexpensive new real estate. The "migration" of the lakeside was accelerated in the 1850s and the 1880s and reached its peak with the major works carried out by the Toronto Harbour Commission during the first half of the twentieth century. The process continues today.

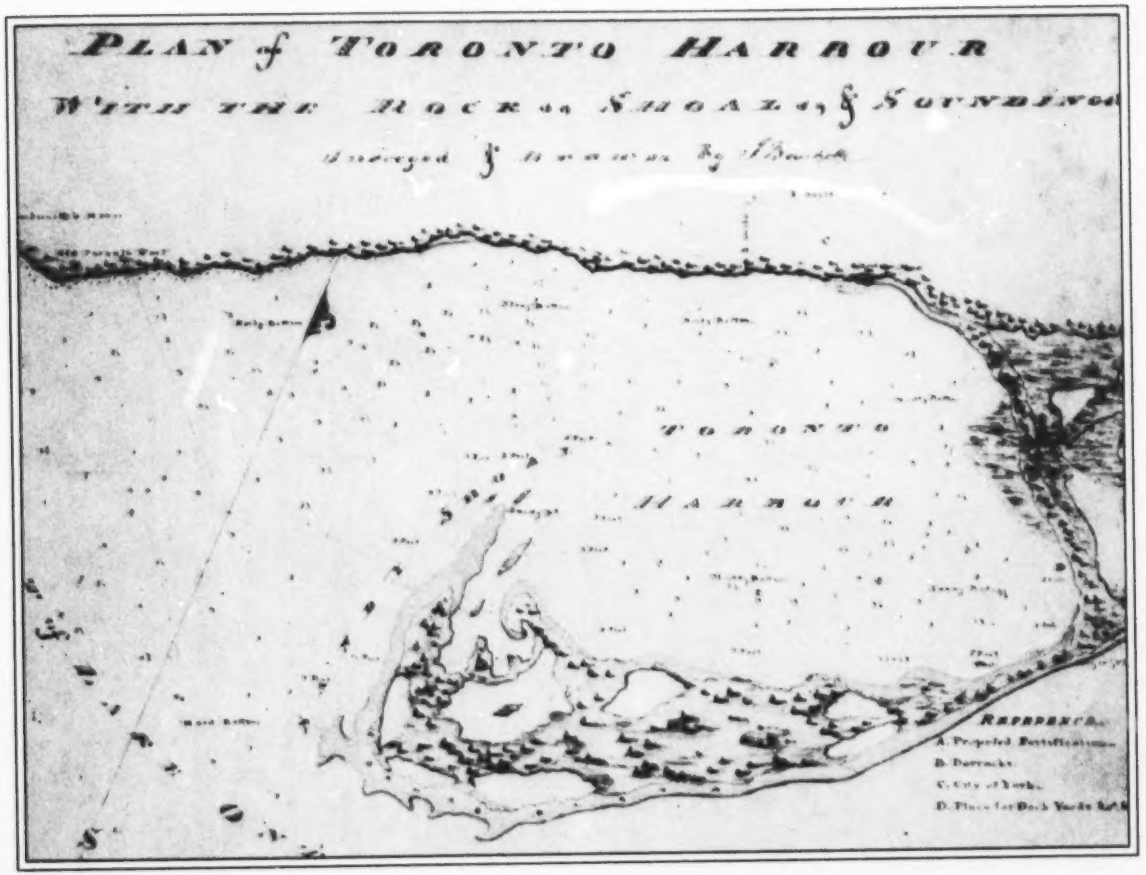
Our intention in this paper is not to recite in detail the steps and timing of the major lakefill process; that has been documented elsewhere. Rather, we want to grapple with its meaning. The analysis will begin by examining Toronto's early settlement along the shores of Lake Ontario during the first half of the nineteenth century so as to define the nature of the early relationships between the city and its waterfront. These relationships will be evaluated and compared to conditions which evolved along the central waterfront, as the process of lakefill continued into the twentieth century, in an effort to understand how the successive filling-in of the lake has altered these early relationships between the city and its waterfront. In concluding, the analysis will identify the challenges which must be met if we are to ensure that the necessary physical linkages are established and that new and fundamentally different relationships between the city and its waterfront evolve.

SETTLEMENT ALONG THE SHORES OF TORONTO'S CENTRAL WATERFRONT

In 1793 when Lieutenant Governor Simcoe first visited the north shores of Lake Ontario, the harbour was shaped by a six mile sand bar which enclosed the open waters of a "natural" bay (Map 1). Recognized during those early years for its "military strength and naval convenience" (Roberts, u.d.), the harbour was the only "natural harbour of refuge on the north shores of Lake Ontario" (Clark, 1924). A roadway, known as Front Street, paralleled the shoreline and served as the major thoroughfare along the water's edge. It was within this setting, along the central shoreline of this natural harbour, that the original ten blocks of Toronto's settlement were laid (Map 2) and the evolution of the city began.

MAP 1

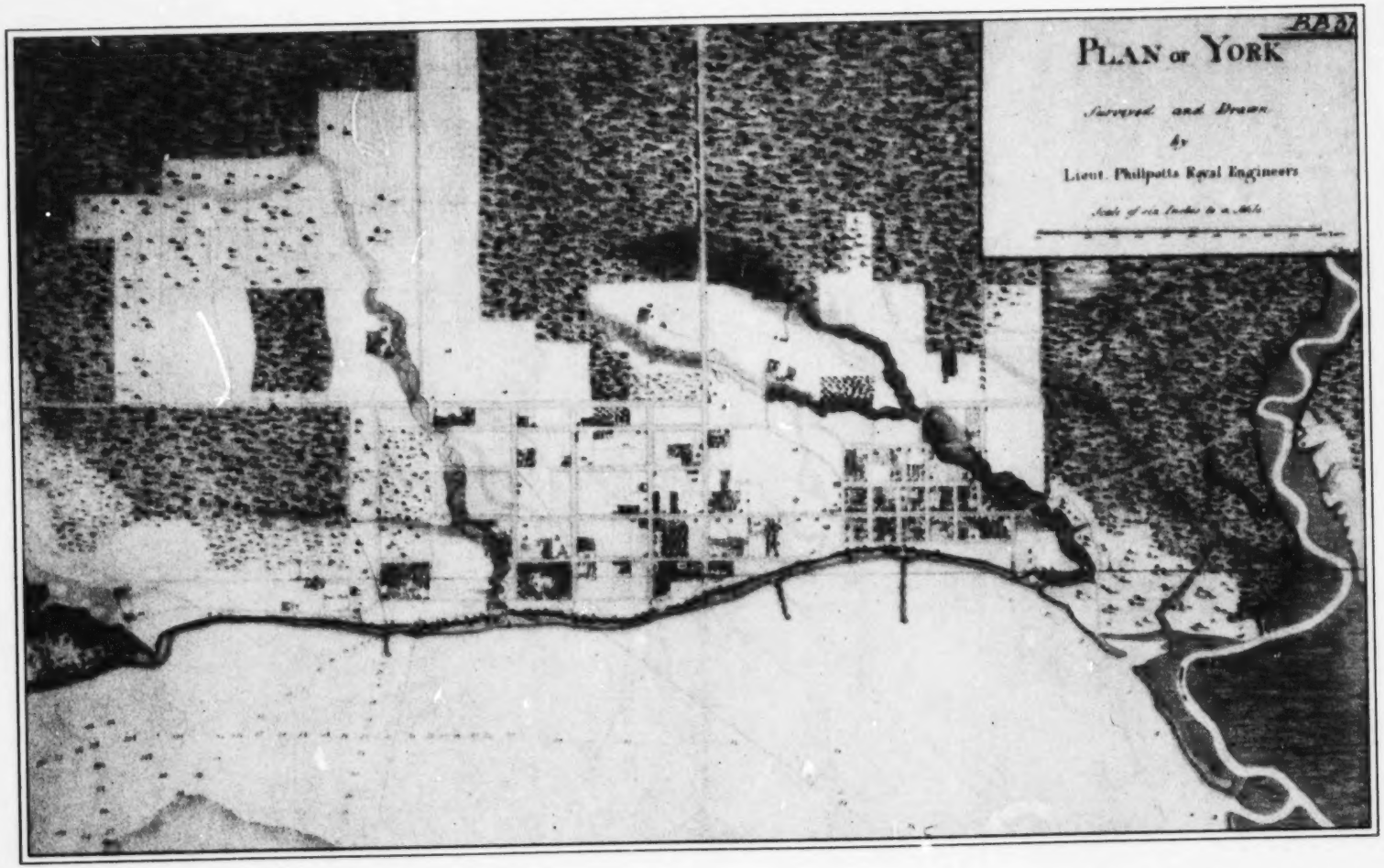
TORONTO HARBOUR, 1792



SOURCE: Gentilcore, Louis (1984), *Ontario history in maps*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).

MAP 2

PLAN OF YORK, 1818



SOURCE: Gentilcore, Louis (1984), *Ontario history in maps*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).

During the early years of the city's growth, a variety of activities linked the city to its waterfront. Close physical ties were possible with a "Front" Street located at the water's edge. The use of water transportation fostered the growth of commercial and industrial activities which in turn created opportunities for employment on the "working" waterfront. The siting of public buildings at the water's edge, such as the Legislative Buildings of Upper Canada (Figure 1), identified the waterfront as an important component in the city's growth. Public buildings and public spaces along the waterfront, including a public promenade between Berkeley and Peter Streets known as the "Walks and Gardens", encouraged the perception that the waterfront was accessible to all. The establishment of a residential community with houses overlooking the banks of the shoreline (as seen in Figure 2) resulted in continual interaction between the waterfront and a local population. This brought life to the water's edge at all times of the day and evening. Interaction was also fostered by the activities of the 1830 fish market, which not only served a commercial function, but (as illustrated in Figure 3) also provided local residents with a public meeting place along the central shores of the city's waterfront.

Along the central waterfront a variety of leisure and recreational activities were available to people of all ages and backgrounds. During the summer months, swimming, fishing and boating activities on Toronto Bay were popular pastimes. Boating activities, in particular, established an early presence on the central shoreline, as many residents owned sailing craft, rowboats and canoes (Hounsome, 1970). The waterfront's first club house, located at the foot of Simcoe Street (Figure 4), eventually became the home of the Royal Canadian Yacht Club. Winter activities were also very popular on Toronto Bay. Various illustrations depict the frozen Toronto Bay as a playground for such winter events as ice fishing, ice boating (Figure 5), skating (Figure 6), sleigh riding (Figure 7) and curling (Figure 8). The association of the central waterfront with a variety of leisure and recreational activities, available to people of all ages and backgrounds, encouraged its use as a summer and winter playground.

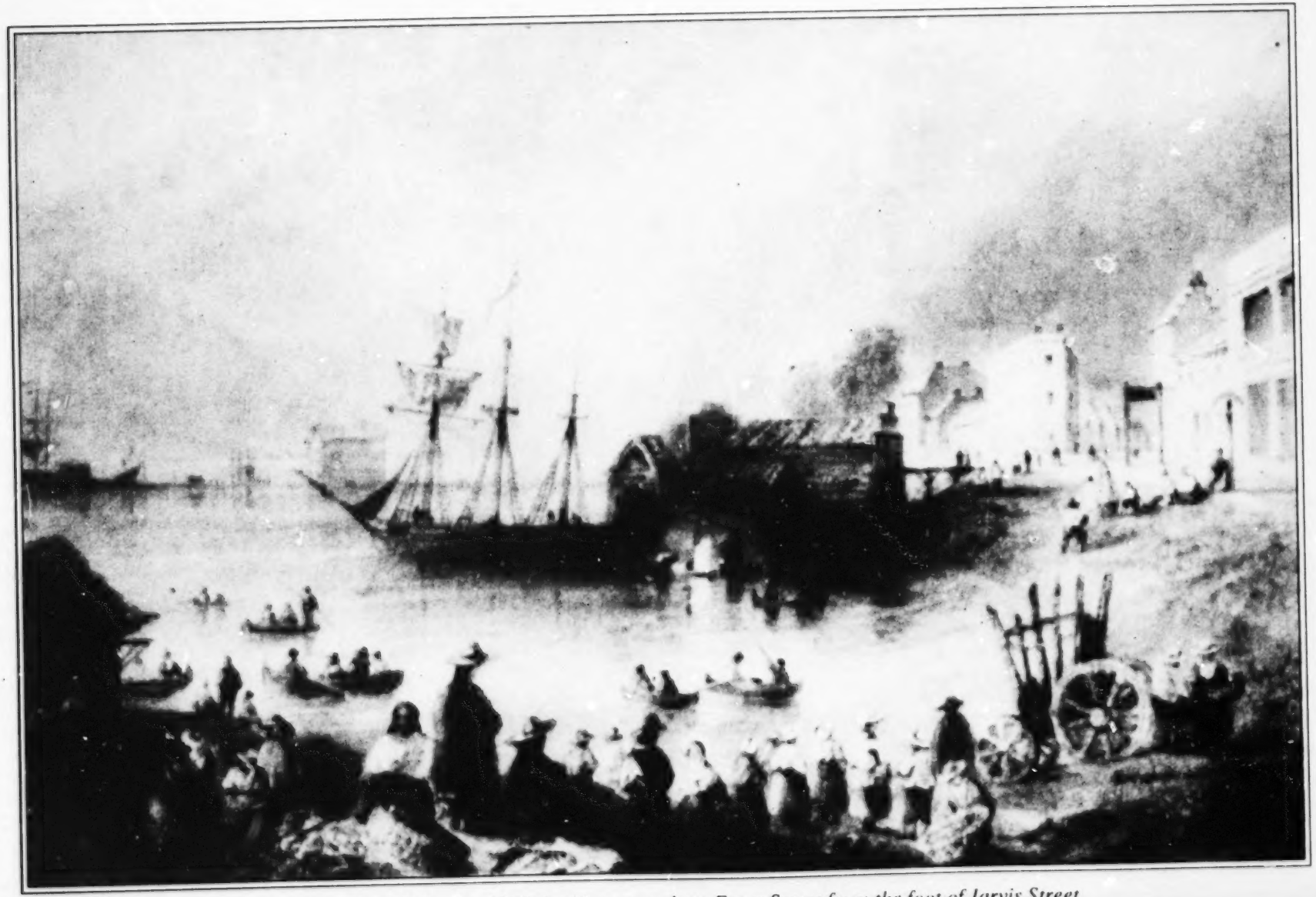
FIGURE 1

Parliament Buildings, opened 1832

FIGURE 2

The Town of York ca. 1815 showing, left to right, the homes of George Crookshank and John Beikie, the military storehouse and the Half Way house along Front Street West from Peter Street to John Street.

FIGURE 3

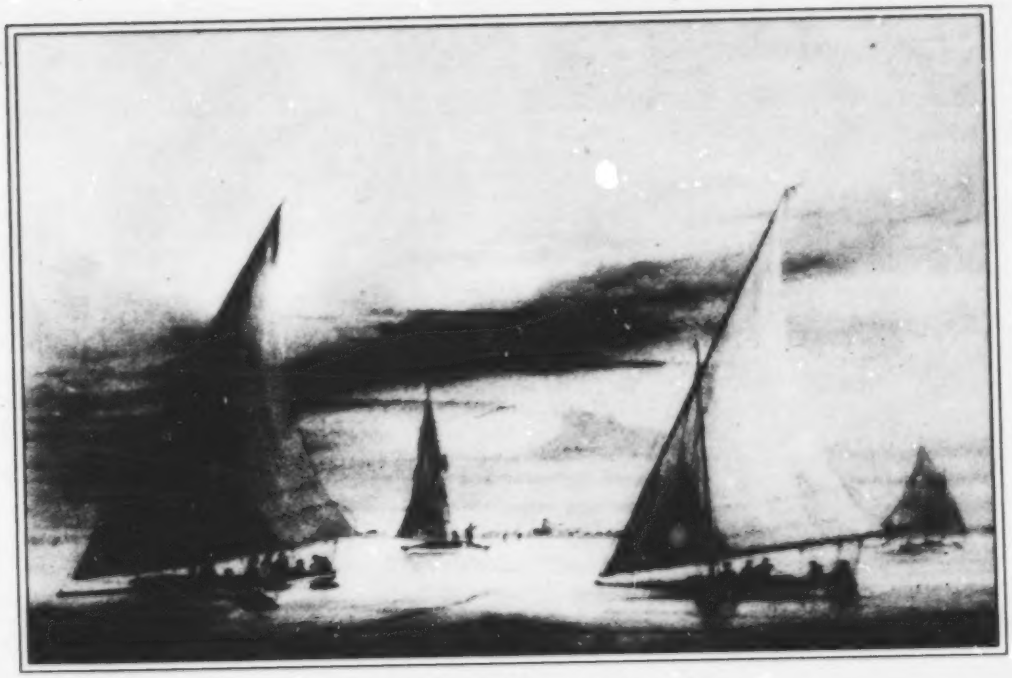


The Toronto Fish Market 1838, looking west along Front Street from the foot of Jarvis Street

FIGURE 4

Royal Canadian Yacht Club (R.C.Y.C.), the first Clubhouse located at the foot of Simcoe Street, 1860

FIGURE 5



Ice boating on Toronto Bay, 1886

FIGURE 6

Skating on Toronto Bay, 1835, showing the shore from University Avenue at the right to Bathurst Street on the left

FIGURE 7

Sleigh scene on Toronto Bay, 1842/1843

FIGURE 8

The Red Jacket Rink of the Toronto Curling Club curling on Toronto Bay, 1872

The key, therefore, to understanding the essence of the relationship between the city and its waterfront are proximity, overlap and unimpeded access. During the city's first decade physical proximity and unimpeded access to the water's edge encouraged a mix of commercial, residential and recreational uses which served to strengthen the relationships between the city and the waterfront.

PRESSURES FOR CHANGE ALONG TORONTO'S CENTRAL WATERFRONT

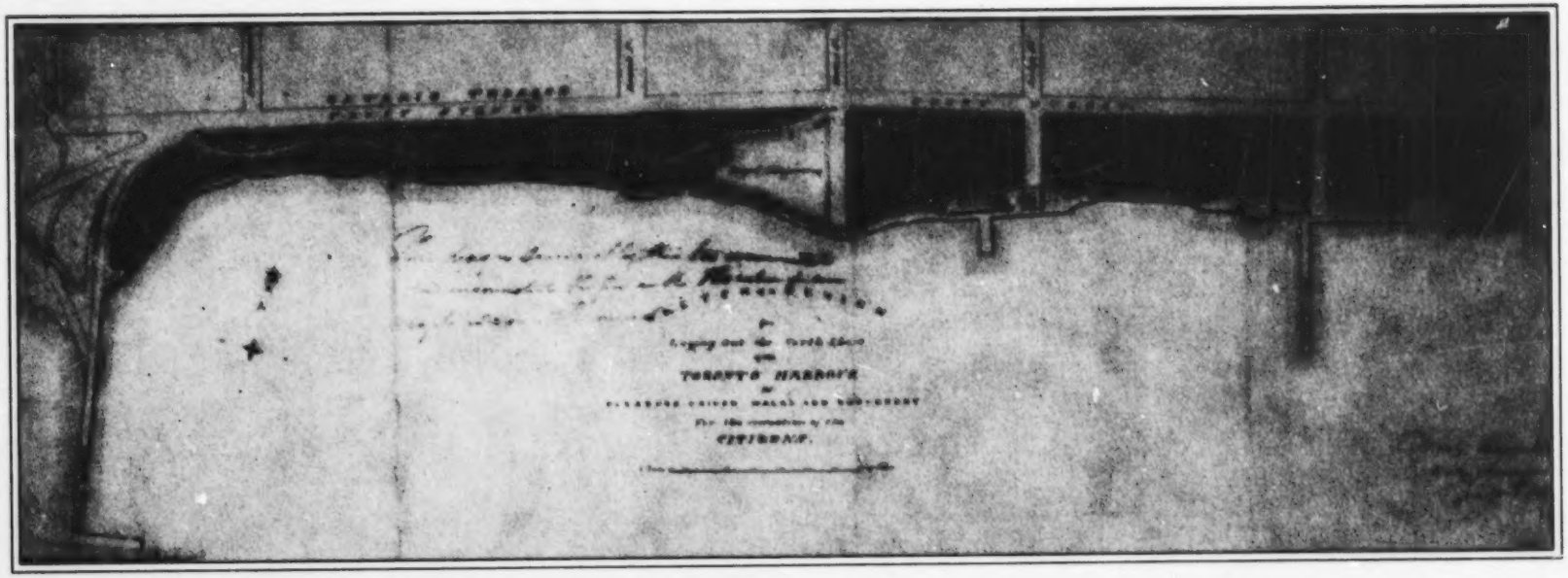
The quality of this relationship was to be severely eroded in the ensuing period. From the 1830s a conflict developed in Toronto between the mounting pressures for industrial and commercial expansion along the waterfront and the desire to secure the water's edge for public access.

The first attempts at securing public access along the central waterfront surfaced in 1837 with ideas of transforming the waterfront lands from Berkeley Street to Peter Street into a waterfront promenade. These lands, commonly referred to as the "Walks and Garden", were entrusted to private individuals for the Town of York by a crown grant of 1818 (Mellen, 1976). That same year the threat to a concept of a waterfront promenade manifested itself with Council's willingness, in principle, to yield a portion of the grounds and the waterlots along the central waterfront to the Toronto and Lake Huron Railroad Company for purposes of constructing a railway (City of Toronto Archives, u.d). The depression of 1837 temporarily stopped any continued discussions for surrendering the waterfront lands to the railway.

The concept of a public promenade along the waterfront resurfaced again in the 1850s. John Howard, the city's first architect, prepared plans for a public promenade along the central shoreline. Howard's plan (as shown in Map 3) provided a design which would complement the existing residential and institutional buildings along the shoreline by providing spaces for the recreation of the citizens while taking advantage of the aesthetics of the water. Howard's waterfront promenade was to be embodied in a grand new civic plan for an "Esplanade" on partially filled land south of Front Street (Careless, 1884).

MAP 3

JOHN HOWARD'S PLAN FOR THE CENTRAL WATERFRONT, 1852



SOURCE: Gentilcore, Louis (1984), *Ontario history in maps*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).

The plans for the Esplanade came under serious threat as the railway companies once again stressed their need for access along the waterfront. By the late 1840s, commercial and industrial activity had gained momentum and more wharves and factories were being constructed on land south of Front Street. The railways' station buildings, sidings and transshipment facilities were concentrated at the water's edge and more land was required to accommodate their expansion. Once again, competing commercial and recreational interests were battling for access and control of the central waterfront.

In an effort to deal with the competing commercial and recreational interests along the central waterfront, the city called for proposals which would accommodate the railway's need for waterfront access, while at the same time ensuring a freed public walkway for the citizens. Two proposals for the creation of the Esplanade were submitted. The first proposal, prepared by Frederick Cumberland, involved

> incorporating both aesthetic and economic aspects by providing for citizens as well as for the railways ... the plan included a public walk at the top of the bank along a new street with tracks at wharf level, 16 or 17 feet below the Esplanade Bridges from Front Street which would slope down to the tracks and the wharves so that vehicular and pedestrian access would not be cut off. (Roberts, u.d.).

Cumberland's plan was designed to free the railways of any level crossings and, at the same time, ensure the safety of pedestrians by providing protected connections between common roadways (Mellen, 1976). On 2 August 1853, the Globe commented on Cumberland's plan:

> This plan is a magnificent one, it combines every advantage except one, that of cheapness. The railways would have space to pass near the wharves close to the business part of the city. We would have a public walk and drive, unparalleled ... in America for extent and beauty of position. Commanding a view of the beautiful Bay and free from the dust and noise of the streets it would be a delightful place of recreation for the people ... the long line of stone embankment, crowned with trees, the massive bridges inclining to the water would give to the outer city such a favourable appearance as is not possessed by any place in America (Mellen, 1976).

The critical point here is that some version of the Cumberland Proposal would have permitted the city to accommodate the railways and secure generous public access to the waterfront. The additional initial cost would have been more than offset by a host of other benefits.

A second proposal, prepared by Casimir Gzowski, on behalf of the Grand Trunk Railway Company, involved the construction of a viaduct which would carry railway tracks along the waterfront and into the heart of the city (City of Toronto Archives, u.d.). While Gzowski's plan accommodated the space required by the railways, it failed to provide some form of public access to the water's edge. The railways explained the lack of public access by arguing that the "costs of an extensive public walkway were too heavy in proportion to the advantages it derived" (Mellen, 1976). When the matter came to a vote at City Council, the influence of the railway companies, together with prominent commercial interests, ensured the Gzowski plan was favoured. Thus the railways, having secured access to the Esplanade lands, were able to proceed with their plans and the process of lakefill along Toronto's central waterfront began.

The railway companies' virtually unchallenged control and access to the water's edge in the mid-1800s ushered in the process of land creation which, for the next 50 years, brought about the physical separation of the city from the water's edge and prevented the evolution of permanent relationships between the city and the waterfront. In essence, this first southward movement of the shoreline set the course for the city's future growth and evolution and determined the role the waterfront would play in that evolution.

THE EFFECTS OF TORONTO'S MOVEABLE SHORELINE

In retrospect, it is apparent that the successive "filling in" of the lake during this period exerted a powerful influence on urban form. An enormous real estate "bank" has been created by the ability to make cheap new land using excavated and dredged materials. As shown in Figure 9, this potential has been profitably exploited for a variety of purposes, including roads, rail corridors, port-industrial lands and recreational facilities. But this

FIGURE 9

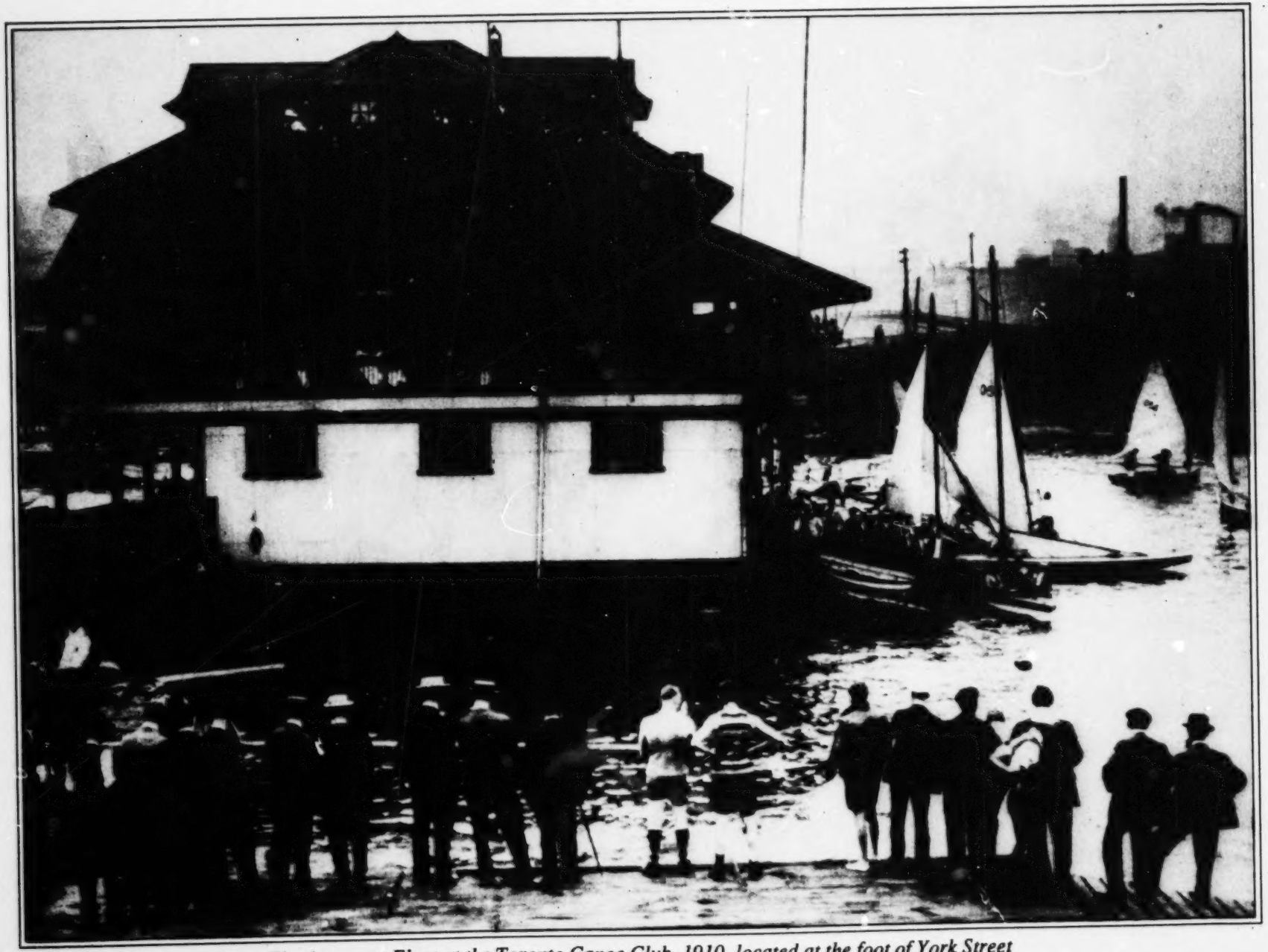
The Esplanade, ca. 1894, looking west from the Toronto Railway Chimney at Frederick and Sherbourne Streets

tangible benefit has continually changed the meeting of land and water, and negated Toronto's potential to be a true waterfront city.

Each new movement of the shoreline redefined the meeting of land and water. Over time the process of lakefill prevented the establishment of a permanent face along the central waterfront, one rooted in the uses and activities which would have given it a defined character. With each movement of the shoreline, a blank page was grafted to that which existed, and with it, a part of the past was lost and its significance in the city's growth and development diminished. The first movement of the shoreline southward during the 1850s illustrates this point. The first major lakefill project created a new parcel of land to the existing shoreline and succeeded in eliminating all references to the waterfront of the city's first decade. The evolution of public buildings and open spaces, the importance of residential and recreational uses and the maritime character of this early waterfront together played an important role in the city's urban growth. Today however the significance of these uses and their importance in shaping the city's urban form are difficult to identify. Each subsequent movement of the shoreline southward removed the significance and importance of these uses in the city's urban development and ultimately prevented a mature set of permanent physical linkages and relationships from developing.

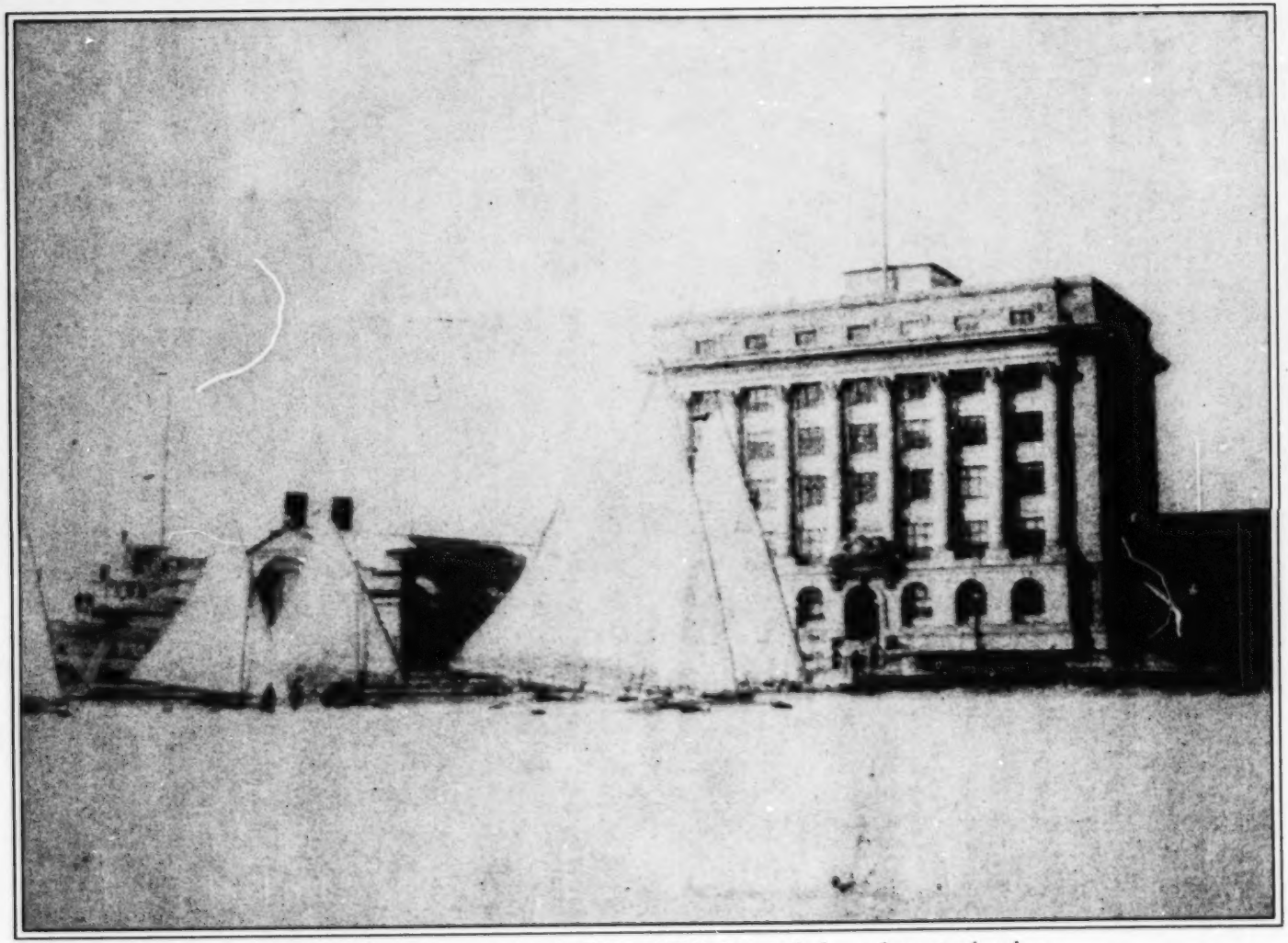
With the movement of the shoreline, succeeding generations of waterfront buildings and parks have been landlocked, waterfront activities, such as the traditional boating activities shown in Figure 10, have been isolated from the city proper and in the process their significance has been radically altered. The fact that Old Fort York, the Canadian National Exhibition Grounds and the Harbour Commission Building (Figure 11) are no longer on the waterfront has drastically diminished their impact. As the waterfront "gateway" to the city was moved further and further from its original position, the water's edge became physically and psychologically inaccessible. The panoramic view, photographed in 1926 (Figure 12), shows how this space between city and water did not have a fabric of streets, blocks, buildings and activities. Rather, it was an idle space traversed by imposing barriers.

FIGURE 10



The Argonaut Float at the Toronto Canoe Club, 1910, located at the foot of York Street

FIGURE 11



Toronto Harbour Commission building, 1920, located along the water's edge

FIGURE 12

Panoramic view, 1926

This space, intended essentially to accommodate railway and railway-served facilities, was never regarded as an integrated addition to the city's overall structure. Street patterns which had evolved to this point in time were not extended through it. Activities and uses associated with the city were never provided with an opportunity to take permanent root. Appended to the city at its foot was an imposing urban void, separated from its heart by railway tracks, terminals and waterhouses. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Toronto had become a waterfront city that would be easy to visit without being aware of that fact.

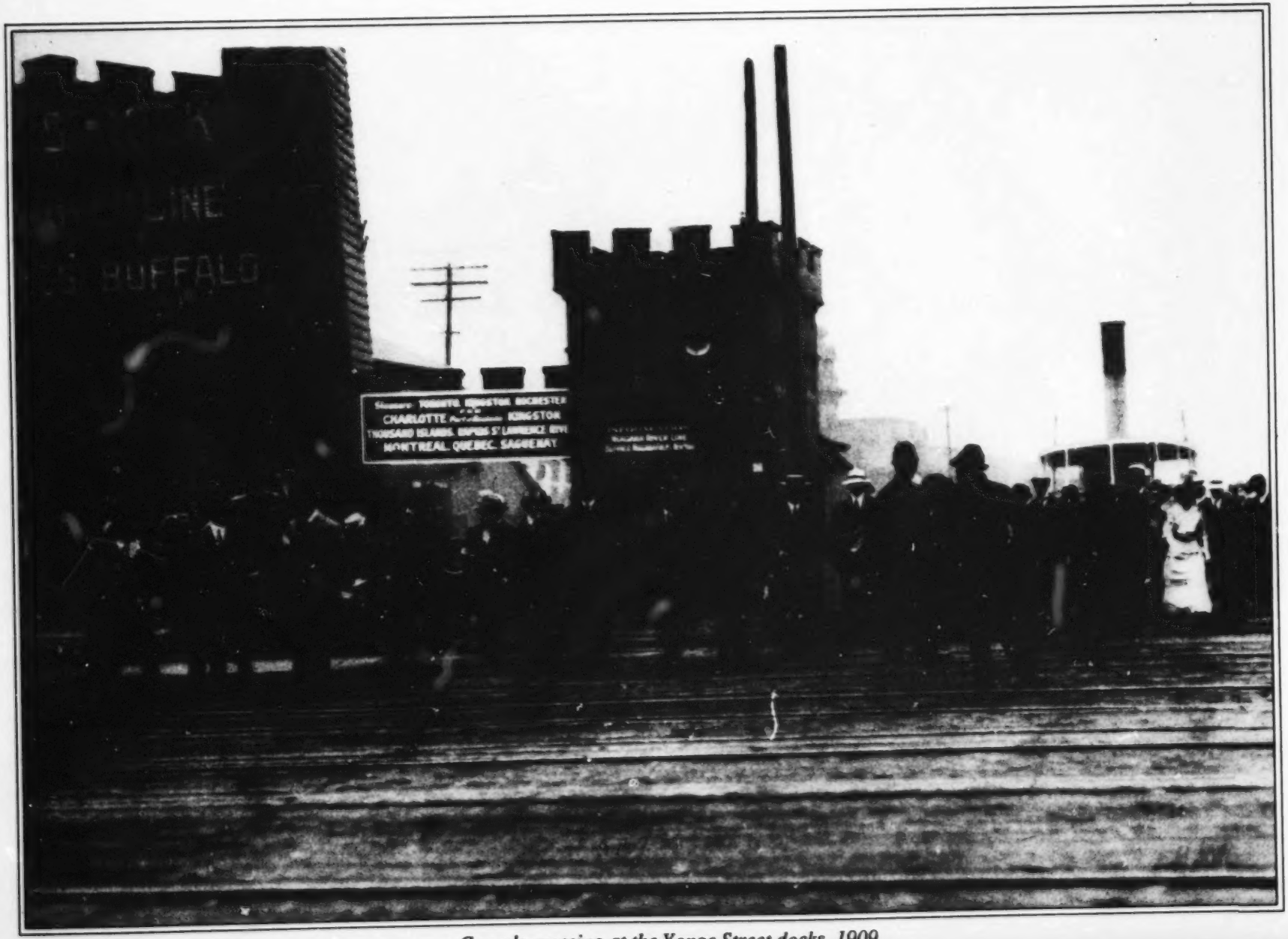
Rupert Brooke, a poet visiting from England in 1913, gave his impressions of the city as follows:

> Such is Toronto. A brisk city of getting on for half a million inhabitants ... It is situated on the shores of a lovely lake; but you never see that, because the railways have occupied the entire lake front. So if, at evening, you try to find your way to the edge of the water, you are checked by a region of smoke, sheds, trucks, wharves, storehouses, 'depots', railway-lines, signals, and locomotives and trains that wander on the tracks up and down and across streets, pushing their way through the pedestrians, and tolling as they go ... (Brooke, 1916).

The photographs (as shown in Figures 13 and 14) effectively illustrate the waterfront which Rupert Brooke so accurately described. By the turn of the century, access to waterfront activities had become both difficult and dangerous. Summer crowds wishing to reach the water's edge to enjoy an afternoon of boating festivities or to catch the ferries at the Yonge Street docks, were first required to traverse six pairs of railway tracks. The unsafe pedestrian crossing conditions resulted in accidents which were reported daily by the press (Mellen, 1976).

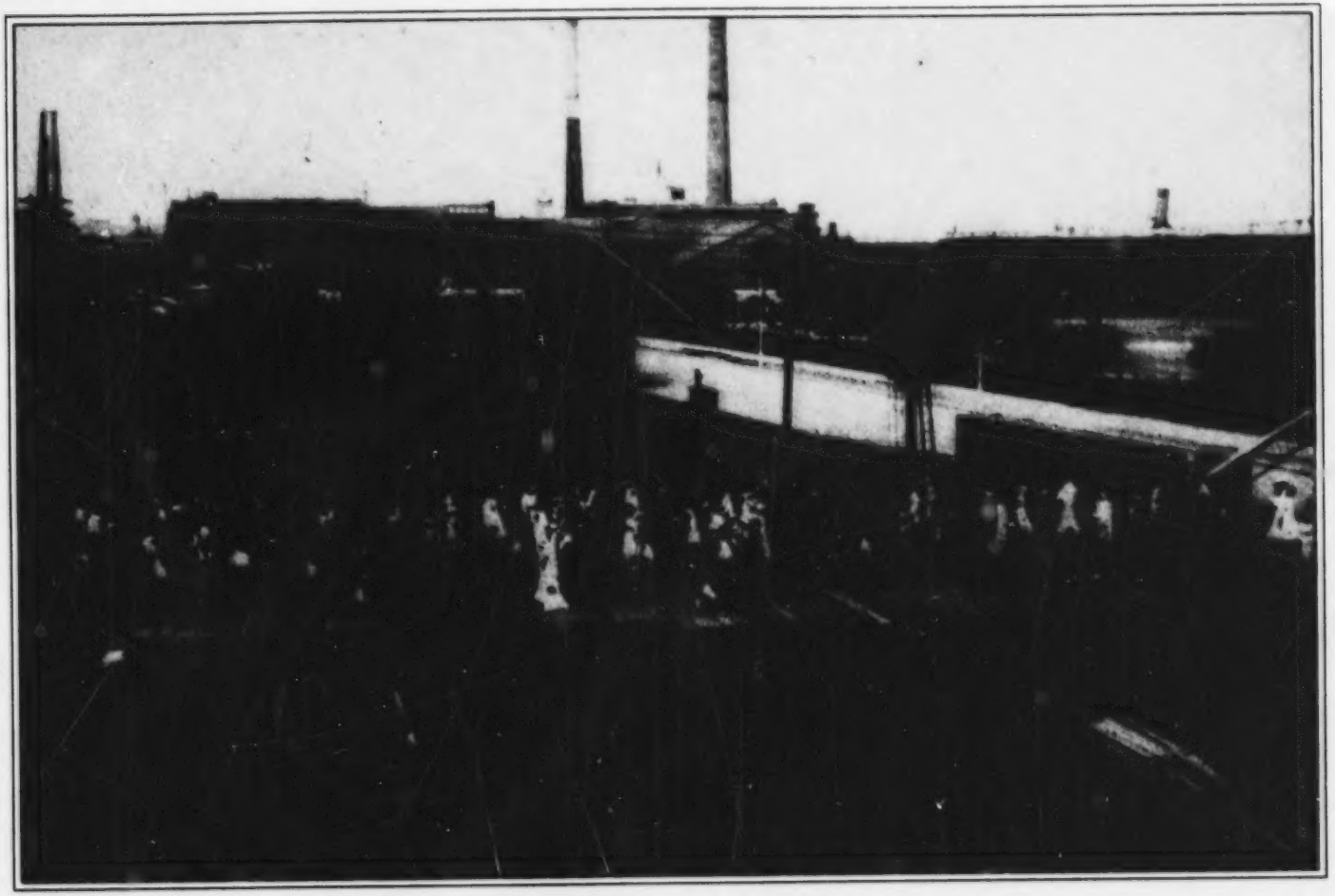
For over a century the "wharves, storehouses, sheds, depots and railway-lines," largely on filled land, have served their purpose and in doing so have cut us off from the lake (Figure 15). For the most part they are now expendable for economic and technological reasons and available for reuse. As we now enter a period in which the opportunities to establish new and fundamentally different relationships between land and

FIGURE 13



Crowds crossing at the Yonge Street docks, 1909

FIGURE 14



Summer crowds crossing at Bay Street, 1912

FIGURE 15

Aerial view showing the central waterfront in the 1980s

water present themselves it is useful to reflect on the dynamics of those earlier transformations and what they portend for the future. In Toronto, it might be said, for example, that these events have merely reflected the North American pattern of restless economic energy that produces rapid substitutions of urban form in contrast to the European pattern of more intricate and layered change; that the way in which land in Toronto was created was economically beneficial to the city, and that the loss of a vital waterfront identity was an inevitable if regrettable by-product of a response to a compelling need.

The point is that we respond collectively to the major forces and issues of the day, and at some level, we become the city we deserve. Toronto has demonstrated an unfortunate tendency on its waterfront when faced with the issue of competing uses and the need for a complex solution and long term investment for future benefit, to opt instead for apparently simple and expedient solutions that are soon revealed to be short sighted. We did this in the simplistic way in which we dealt with shoreline expansion in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century with the development of recreational facilities in the western beaches; we did it again by failing to extend the subway to Queen's Quay in the early 1950s; and again with the elevated Gardiner Expressway in the 1960s.

CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE OF TORONTO'S WATERFRONT

As Toronto enters the 1990s and attempts are made to correct some of the mistakes, in an area which is truly the city's most precious land resource, what can be learned from these episodes in the city's past?

First and foremost - there is a need to finally solidify the water's edge as a permanent high quality feature of our city so that through time a set of historical references, appropriate uses, associations and traditions can be re-established. The two waterfront places which have such an unbroken history and speak eloquently to this need are the Eastern Beaches (Figure 16) and the Toronto Island.

FIGURE 16

Aerial view showing the Eastern Beaches, 1988

Secondly, we need to finally tackle the issue of complex interrelated patterns of use on the waterfront as in the city itself. The filled-land needs to be embraced and incorporated into the urban fabric with a dense and active network of overlapping activities extending to the water's edge including recreation, work-related uses, and places to live - new waterfront neighbourhoods, not vast precincts of ill-defined inaccessible and underutilized territory.

Thirdly, to accomplish this we need to make a generous and farsighted investment in the future, cleaning up the mess we have made of the environment, making the bold and necessary moves to establish the required infrastructure, and secure the broad, simple and unselfconscious public access to the water's edge for our city which has eluded us for the past 100 years.

PHOTOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

FIGURE 1

Robert Jacob Hamerton, "Parliament Buildings, Toronto U.C., 1841". Lithograph on wove paper. Negative No. T34487. Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library, Baldwin Room.

FIGURE 2

Front Street West looking north from Lake Ontario between Peter Street at left and John Street at right, ca. 1815. Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library, J. Ross Robertson collection MTL 2342.

FIGURE 3

Bartlett, William Henry, "Fish-market, Toronto 1838". Steel engraving and water colour on wove paper. Negative No. MTL 1209. Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library, Baldwin Room.

FIGURE 4

Royal Canadian Yacht Club, the First Clubhouse located at the foot of Simcoe Street, Toronto, 1860. City of Toronto Archives, William James Collection. Volume 23, No. 1511.

FIGURE 5

Armstrong, William, "Ice Boating on Toronto Bay, 1886". Watercolour and pastel. Negative No. MTL 1352. Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library, Baldwin Room.

FIGURE 6

Howard, John George, "Skating on Toronto Bay, showing the shore from about University Avenue at right to Bathurst Street at left, 1835". Watercolour. Negative No. MTL 1785. Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library, Baldwin Room.

FIGURE 7

Downman, J.T., "Sleighing on Toronto Bay, 1842/1843". Lithograph on buff and grey tint stones with watercolour. Negative No. MTL 1124. Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library, Baldwin Room.

FIGURE 8

Unknown Artist, "Toronto Curling Club (Red Jacket Rink) and Caledonian Match, 1872". Copy photograph (col. with watercolour) of composite photo. Negative No. MTL 1192. Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library, Baldwin Room.

FIGURE 9

The Esplanade looking west from the Toronto Railway Chimney at Frederick and Sherbourne Streets, ca. 1894. City of Toronto Archives, City Engineering Collection. Volume 1, No. 44b.

FIGURE 10

Argonaut Float at Toronto Canoe Club located at the foot of York Street, 1910. City of Toronto Archives, William James Collection. Volume 22, No. 1495.

FIGURE 11

Toronto Harbour Commission building located along the water's edge, 1920. Toronto Harbour Commission Archives.

FIGURE 12

Panoramic view, 1926. Reproduced from Marathon Realty, *A street called Front*, (Toronto, 1983).

FIGURE 13

Crowds Crossing at the Yonge Street Docks, 1909. City of Toronto Archives, William James Collection. Volume 8, No. 1105.

FIGURE 14

Summer crowds crossing tracks at Bay Street, 1912. City of Toronto Archives, William James Collection. Volume 18, No. 1089.

FIGURE 15

Aerial view showing the central waterfront, 1980s. City of Toronto Planning Department.

FIGURE 16

Eastern Beaches, 1988. City of Toronto Planning Department.

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